

PLOTS



RON WILSON

Neil and Lyla Beitelspacher have about 1,500 acres enrolled in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. Brandon Mason, left, Department private land biologist, has worked closely with the Emmons County landowners the last few years.

By Ron Wilson

For more than a half century, portions of Neil and Lyla Beitelspacher's Emmons County farm have been enrolled in one conservation program or another.

"I've always been soil-conservation-minded," Neil said.

And it shows.

Trees grow where Neil's father refused to believe that they would. "I had the hardest time convincing him that we could even get trees to grow here," he said. "Now look ..."

Neil was born on the farm 83 years ago. He jokes about his mother and father having to pay the doctor just \$5 for the delivery, saying that he must not be worth much. Lyla, his wife of 61 years, grew up farther west near the Missouri River.

Since 2004, Neil and Lyla have been involved in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. PLOTS has several faces under the Department's Private Land Initiative program, including those – Working Lands PLOTS, Habitat PLOTS and Food PLOTS – in which the Beitelspacher's have enrolled about 1,500 acres.

PLOTS was initiated in 1997 as way for the Department to work with landowners to

open private land to hunters. Currently, more than 860,000 acres are enrolled in PLOTS, with a goal of 1 million acres by the end of the decade.

Neil and Lyla's place is dotted here and there with inverted triangular yellow PLOTS signs that welcome hunters to get out of vehicles, stretch their legs and maybe shoot a bird or two. The land, like the Beitelspachers, is inviting.

"I had the chance to rent our land to private hunters, but that would exclude my family from hunting and it would be open to only guys from Minneapolis, Chicago or wherever they were from," Neil said. "I wasn't interested in that."

What the couple wanted was a program

sympathetic to the land and wildlife, provide a place for a beginning hunter to shoot her first rooster, and help make ends meet. "Five years ago I got to the point where I couldn't walk ... work the land," Neil said from his wheelchair, as diabetes has robbed his legs of much of their use. What walking he does is with the aid of a walker. "(PLOTS) pays the taxes."

Brandon Mason, Department private land biologist, said Neil and Lyla are the kind of people who get a kick out of knowing a guy and his kid walked their land and shot a few birds. "They care about the land and the people who use it," Mason said. "Neil and Lyla make what I do pretty easy."

The PLOTS program has introduced the Emmons County couple to a number of people they would never have met otherwise. "We like having people come around," Lyla said. "We've met some really nice people who have hunted our land."

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Before PLOTS, Lyla had to turn a husband and wife from Fargo away because the Beitelspacher's children were due home at any minute to hunt. Years later, she's still fretting about it. "I shouldn't have done that," she said. "I should have let them hunt."

This old sign is further proof that Neil and Lyla Beitelspacher have been interested for years in habitat conservation programs on their Emmons County property.



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Even though the Department's PLOTS signs are an open invitation to walk and hunt, Neil and Lyla still get people coming to their door just to let them know they're out there, and to say thanks for the opportunity. "You'd be surprised at the number of people who stop," Neil said. "They don't have to do that, but they do."

The PLOTS program is a hit with many hunters and Neil and Lyla know it. He tells the story of a young girl looking to shoot her first ring-necked rooster. When Neil ran into the young hunter, she was waiting for her dad and bird dog to catch up. "She could really care less if she shot a bird or not," Neil said. "She was just happy she was on land where no one was going to run her off. I think that's half of it for many of the people who hunt PLOTS – knowing that someone is not going to chase them off."

Then there was the time Neil was visiting with some hunters from out-of-town and talk turned to his hobby of collecting quarters. It seems he was missing a certain one from his collection, but the hunters remedied that with a gift in the mail. "They sent me four quarters and they didn't have to," he said. "Sometimes it's the little things ..."

Not everyone in the Beitelspacher clan was thrilled with putting 1,500 acres into the Department's PLOTS program. "The kids were against it at first because this was their happy hunting ground," Neil said. "But now they know it was the thing to do."

CRP Concerns

The focus of the Game and Fish Department's Private Land Initiative program now and for the next couple of years is the Conservation Reserve Program. The push is on offering additional PLOTS incentives to producers who extend or re-enroll CRP contracts due to expire in 2007-10. For North Dakota, that means about half, or 1.7 million acres of CRP are in jeopardy next year, and another 1.2 million in 2008-10.

CRP has been a boon to North Dakota and its wildlife. Millions of acres of grasses have reduced soil erosion, improved water quality, and greatly increased the amount of habitat for ground-nesting birds, ducks, deer and other animals. Wildlife populations today – and some are saying today is the good old days – are what they are in large part because of CRP.

"The bottom line is that we want landowners to keep their land in CRP if it's with the Game and Fish Department or not," said Kevin Kading, Department private land section leader. "What we're doing is offering additional incentives if they enroll CRP in PLOTS."

Since June, the program has gained about 25,000 CRP acres in North Dakota's southern tier.

Wildlife managers who have seen the rewards of CRP see few options other than safeguarding as many acres as possible. "When you think about the nesting habitat, the huntable habitat ... there isn't a wildlife

conservation program out there that has done what CRP has done," Kading said, and that's one reason why it is so important that CRP is reauthorized in the 2007 farm bill.

Changes will be noticeable if CRP acres in North Dakota are lost. "There is no question that CRP provides many benefits for wildlife, landowners and hunters," said Casey Anderson, Department PLI field operations coordinator. "The Game and Fish Department is concerned if North Dakota loses a significant amount of CRP because populations of game species such as pheasants, grouse, ducks and deer, as well as nongame species like grasshopper sparrows and bobolinks, could decline significantly," he said.

The Department's top three PLOTS programs are Working Lands (392,341 acres), CRP Cost-sharing (295,962 acres) and Habitat PLOTS (137,348 acres). Working Lands is a relative newcomer to the Department's PLI program. It was initiated in 2003 for producers who do not necessarily want to take acreage out of production, yet have quality wildlife habitat on their property and are willing to allow public access.

Kading said the key to Working Lands or other PLI programs is quality. "Hunters are concerned about there being good quality PLOTS land out there," he said. "We are continually adjusting our criteria in order to sign up more and more quality acres."

Some lands, Kading warns, are deceiving at first glance. "Sometimes a PLOTS might not look like the best, but there is a reason for that," he said. "We might be, for example, in the process of working with the landowner to create habitat. So you can't judge a piece when you first drive in."

The bottom line, Anderson said, is that the Department's PLI program is making changes on the landscape that positively influences wildlife, hunters and landowners. "When you help create a Habitat PLOTS or help out with CRP grass seed costs, you know you're doing something positive for everyone involved," he said.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

Private Land Initiative Access Acres Provided 2006 PLOTS Program

Working Lands Plots	392,341 acres
CRP Cost-sharing Plots	295,962 acres
Habitat Plots	137,348 acres
CREP/Coverlocks	14,383 acres
Native Forest Plots	13,941 acres
WRP Incentive Plots	6,434 acres
Beginning Farmer Plots	2,720 acres
Tree Planting Cost-share Plots	2,667 acres
Food Plots	1,247 acres

Total Public Access Available: 867,043 acres
(as of August 9, 2006)